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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE CHINESE POSITION IN NORTH VIETNAM

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
5 August 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

The Chinese Position in North Vietnam

SUMMARY

The Chinese Communists have considerably more influence with the North Vietnamese than any other bloc country because of their similarity of views on the need to continue the war. Peking is not, however, either by dint of its war aid or by its position astride the main war aid channels to the DRV, in a position where it can as yet dominate or control Hanoi's important policy decisions.

This was clearly demonstrated in 1965 when, as a consequence of the stiffened Soviet support on the Vietnam war in the wake of Khrushchev's ouster, Hanoi backed away from support of Peking in the Sino-Soviet dispute and moved to a middle-of-the-road position. In doing so, the Vietnamese quickly put their own national interests before Peking's interests in an effort to obtain the greatest possible support from both bloc powers.

The Vietnamese have continued to act independently of both Peking and Moscow in all basic policy decisions. Hanoi's four-point proposal on settling the war, for example, remains more flexible on the issue of US troop withdrawal from Vietnam than the position the Chinese have taken on this matter. Although Vietnamese policy on the war seems aligned far more closely with Chinese than with Soviet views, this stems from an independent assessment by Hanoi of its prospects, rather than from a hold by the Chinese on the Vietnamese. Hanoi, like Peking, still estimates that US power in Vietnam can eventually be countered

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with little outside aid and that Vietnamese resources are still sufficient to wage a protracted conflict.

Although there are important pro-Chinese elements active in the North Vietnamese politburo, all the Hanoi leaders, whether pro-Chinese or pro-Soviet are primarily nationalistic in their outlook. Those sympathetic with Chinese ideas on continuing violent revolution are not subservient to Peking. They, like the entire leadership, are demonstrably leery of too much reliance on China or the Soviet Union.

To some extent, the Vietnamese probably accept Chinese advice on the tactical conduct of the insurgency in South Vietnam. On larger matters, however, the Vietnamese listen to China or to other bloc allies, then make their own decision. The present nature and degree of Chinese pressure, for example, would not be sufficient to force the Vietnamese to stay in the war if they decided on their own volition to end the fighting.

We believe the North Vietnamese will continue to retain basic direction and control over the war unless massive Chinese combat forces are moved into the DRV. This estimate of North Vietnamese independence in the conflict would have to be reviewed, of course, if there should be a massive influx of Chinese combat troops into the DRV.

China's Past Influence

1. Prior to the fall of Khrushchev in October 1964, China had become the dominant bloc influence in Vietnamese affairs, and Hanoi had openly aligned itself with a number of important Chinese positions in the Sino-Soviet dispute. Led by Party First Secretary Le Duan, the more militant members of the North Vietnamese party leadership spearheaded Hanoi's attack on modern revisionism. This group of leaders includes Le Duc Tho, the chief of the party organization department; Nguyen Chi Thanh, who may have been sent to South Vietnam to direct the war effort in early 1965; and Hoang Van Hoan, former ambassador to China. By late spring of 1964 they were joined in their attacks on Khrushchev's policies by the more moderate members of the leadership including Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap.

2. The North Vietnamese support for the Chinese, and Peking's consequent influence with Hanoi, did not come into being as a result of Peking's political pressure on the DRV, but rather sprang from a Vietnamese belief that Khrushchev's detente policies with the US were undercutting continued militant prosecution of the insurgency in South Vietnam. Khrushchev, moreover, was even reluctant to offer full-fledged political and diplomatic support to Hanoi on the war, while Peking was fully behind the Vietnamese hard line.

3. Hanoi was not happy, however, in having to rely almost solely on Peking's backing in the war and was anxious to find a counterweight to the Chinese. The opportunity came with the new Soviet leadership in the fall of 1964. These new leaders viewed Communist prospects in South Vietnam as fairly promising and believed that Moscow without excessive risk could improve its position within the world Communist camp by providing increased propaganda and material support to Hanoi's war effort.

4. In response, the North Vietnamese promptly opened the door to better relations with Moscow and moved back toward a middle-of-the-road position in the Sino-Soviet dispute. The action was a clear demonstration that although Peking had been very influential in Hanoi, its voice was not decisive.

Elements within the DRV leadership which only short months before had been echoing the Peking line revealed their basic nationalistic sentiments and openly sought assistance from the Soviet Union.

Counterweights to Chinese Influence

5. The initiation of the US air raids over North Vietnam underscored to the Hanoi leadership the wisdom of having good relations with the Soviets despite Peking's objections. Hanoi probably believed that its only chance of effectively countering the threat of sustained US air attacks would be by the acquisition of sophisticated military equipment. Some was available from the Chinese, but Moscow had to be the prime source. The provision of Soviet arms aid to the DRV tended to counterbalance the military assistance provided by China and thus helped to ensure that Chinese aid did not become a handle by which Peking could get a decisive grip on North Vietnam's policy toward the war.

6. The warming relations between Moscow and Hanoi in early 1965 irritated the Chinese and were probably a partial reason for Peking's action in deliberately harassing and impeding Soviet military aid shipments across China to the DRV, thereby slowing the construction of Hanoi's air defense system. The Chinese move probably further lowered Peking's stock in the eyes of the Vietnamese.

7. On the other hand, the Chinese action must have demonstrated to Hanoi the degree of its dependence on Peking in obtaining all bloc military assistance. The Soviet Union, despite the rail harassments, refused to ship its aid by sea. Recently, the Chinese monopoly of aid channels to the DRV has been strengthened with the destruction of the Haiphong harbor POL import facilities. POL now must come largely by land through China.

8. The situation has not, however, given the Chinese a decisive hold on the North Vietnamese since neither Chinese nor Soviet war aid is as yet critical to continued North Vietnamese support of the war in the south. Hanoi probably has sufficient war materiel stocks on hand to continue supplying the insurgents for the time being even if the Chinese cut off Soviet and other bloc aid coming in by land and threaten to cut off their own aid if Hanoi does not follow Chinese advice.

Limits on Peking's Aid

9. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that the Chinese intend to stop sending materiel, arms, and engineering troops. The war is very important to Peking's own interests. The Chinese view it as a test case of Mao's theory that "wars of liberation" can be fought without provoking a US nuclear response against either the local Communists or their sponsors. North Vietnamese statements indicate a belief that Peking is willing to make a considerable investment in the conflict in order to keep the fighting going along present lines--a protracted struggle by proxy, fought if necessary to the last Vietnamese. The question of the massive introduction of Chinese Communist "volunteers" probably would not arise unless the very existence of the Hanoi regime were threatened. At that point Hanoi would undoubtedly welcome such support and Peking would probably provide it.

10. For the present, however, Hanoi seems to realize that it will carry on the bulk of the fighting through the use of its own resources. This was underscored by DRV politburo member Le Duc Tho in an article published in a North Vietnamese party journal last February. The lines of strategy and methods of the revolution, he wrote, are a responsibility which our party must maintain as we ourselves and alone can realize most clearly the problems concerning the revolution in our country.

11. Vietnamese assertions that they must rely mainly on their own resources to prosecute the revolution appear also to reflect a genuine and deeply held belief. The theme of "self-reliance" has been a persistent one in Vietnamese Communist statements, and has not at all been abandoned or dampened down in the face of the increasing allied military pressure on the Viet Cong and on the DRV.

Recent Developments

12. Several Chinese statements in recent months have clearly reflected distaste for some Vietnamese policy actions, and also suggest that Peking does not enjoy a controlling influence over Hanoi. In early May, for example, the secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party, Teng Hsiao-ping, indirectly criticized Hanoi's attendance at several pro-Soviet party congresses, declaring that no "centrist" position in the Sino-Soviet dispute can be held. The Vietnamese, however, have been

willing to turn a deaf ear to Chinese diatribes against the Soviet Union, which in many instances can be construed as applying to the DRV. Hanoi is apparently willing to bear veiled Chinese insults on this issue as long as Peking takes no action which would actually force the Vietnamese to take sides. It is possible that Ho Chi Minh visited Peking in late May and early June in part to seek assurances that the Chinese would not completely break with Moscow and thus further complicate the delivery of Soviet war aid to the DRV.

13. Recent North Vietnamese propaganda and actions suggest that another purpose of Ho's trip may have been to confirm Chinese support for a further intensification of the war by the insurgents. In the past month, North Vietnamese propaganda statements have been increasingly strong in voicing Hanoi's determination to continue the war. Moreover, DRV actions in sending an entire North Vietnamese division directly across the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam and in improving over-all Communist capabilities just north of the line may reflect a willingness to undertake a bolder war policy in the near future.

14. While such a move may coincide with Peking's own views on the war and its advice to the Vietnamese, the action probably reflects an independent North Vietnamese decision on the war based on an estimate that US military strength in South Vietnam can be countered by continued heavy infiltration from the DRV.

Prospects

15. North Vietnam will continue to endeavor to balance Soviet and Chinese influence. Although this is a narrow and tortuous path for the Vietnamese, it offers them the most profitable and flexible position they can obtain with relation to the war. The policy is likely to keep both Soviet and Chinese aid flowing while leaving Hanoi with the ultimate decision on the prosecution of the war. Hanoi would retain the option of choosing negotiations at some future date as the Soviet have implicitly suggested, or of pressing on with the struggle as the Chinese have openly urged. As long as the DRV leadership is resolved to carry on the war, the extreme Chinese position against negotiations is useful in

stiffening the image in the West of Asian Communist determination to carry on the conflict.

16. However, should the Vietnamese at some point decide to move toward negotiations or a de-escalation of the war, Peking's political pressure would not be sufficient to force them to keep up the fighting. The Chinese could, of course, decide to denounce Hanoi and might take such a step if they thought it could create fissures in the Hanoi party leadership. However, the Chinese would have little option but to accept Hanoi's decision. Its only alternative would be direct intervention, and all available evidence suggests that the Chinese desire to avoid this prospect. This estimate of North Vietnamese independence in the conflict would have to be reviewed, however, if at any time there should be a massive influx of Chinese combat troops into the DRV presumably to guard against the possibility of a US ground invasion of North Vietnam.

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